



The Unraveling of Moral and Psychological Motivations: Analyzing *The Secret History*

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Received: 21 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 20 Mar 2026; Accepted: 26 Mar 2026; Available online: 30 Mar 2026
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Abstract— In *The Secret History*, Donna Tartt subverts the traditional mystery by revealing the killers in the opening pages. This paper explores the novel as a "whydunnit"—an inverted detective story where the true enigma is the psychological and moral decay of its characters. Centered on a group of elite classics students, the study examines how their obsession with Ancient Greek ideals and Dionysian rituals leads to a cold, Nietzschean rejection of conventional morality. Through the eyes of the unreliable narrator, Richard Papeen, I argue that the murder of Bunny Corcoran is more than a cover-up; it is the tragic result of "aesthetic solipsism," where beauty is valued above human life. By integrating Freudian theory and the Aristotelian concept of hamartia, this analysis demonstrates how the pursuit of intellectual transcendence inevitably collapses into a haunting reality of guilt, paranoia, and self-destruction.



Keywords— Donna tartt, Freud, Whydunnit, Detective fiction

Introduction

The Secret History by Donna Tartt is a dark, atmospheric novel about Richard Papeen, a young man who transfers to Hampden College in Vermont and becomes involved with a small, exclusive group of students studying Greek under the charismatic and mysterious professor Julian Morrow. The group, led by the brilliant but cold Henry Winter, is obsessed with ancient Greek culture, particularly its ideals of beauty, intellectualism, and transcendence. As their studies intensify, the group's desire to experience something profound leads them to recreate a Bacchanalian ritual, which spirals into an accidental murder.

In their attempt to conceal the crime, tensions rise within the group, culminating in the decision to murder one of their own, Bunny Corcoran, who threatens to expose their secret. What follows is a haunting exploration of guilt, paranoia, and moral corruption as the characters descend into self-destruction. Through Richard's eyes, the novel unveils the psychological disintegration of each member, as their sophisticated, academic facades give way to fear, betrayal, and madness.

Whydunnit

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is a quintessential example of a "whydunnit," where the central focus is not on *who* committed the murder but *why*. The whydunnit is also called 'howcatchem' or 'inverted detective story.' It is a form of crime or mystery fiction where the primary focus is on understanding the motive behind the crime rather than uncovering the identity of the perpetrator (as in a whodunnit) or figuring out how the crime was committed (as in a howdunnit). In a whydunnit, the reader may know both the criminal's identity and the method of the crime early on, but the central mystery revolves around the psychological, emotional, or circumstantial reasons that drove the criminal to commit the act. This type of narrative explores the deeper layers of human behavior, often delving into the moral, social, and psychological forces that lead to criminal actions.

Whodunit, with its emphasis on pure puzzle, and the whydunit, takes the psychological approach and emphasizes why the murder took place, belong to the howdunit. It followed the whodunit by about half a century and swung the emphasis to the method by which the murder

was committed (Odell). The novel reveals the crime upfront, in fact, one of the murderers reveals it, letting readers know early on that a murder has occurred, and that the culprits are members of an elite group of students Henry, Francis, Camilla, Richard, and Charles, studying classical literature. The narrative then focuses on unraveling the psychological and emotional motivations that drove the characters to commit the murder, making the exploration of their moral and psychological unraveling the core of the novel's intrigue.

Features of Whydunnit

Early Revelation of the Crime: The “Who” is Clear

Unlike traditional mysteries, *The Secret History* opens with the acknowledgment of the crime. In the prologue, the narrator, Richard Pape, reveals the story's central event: the murder of Bunny Corcoran by his friends. Richard reflects on how he and his classmates, particularly Henry, were involved in the crime:

"I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell" (Prologue).

From the beginning, Tartt clarifies that the novel will not be about discovering *who* killed Bunny, but about *why* it happened. This immediate revelation shifts the focus to the psychological underpinnings and philosophical justifications behind the murder. It also highlights that the “why” will be rooted in character psychology, interpersonal dynamics, and the corrupting influence of their intellectual pursuits.

The unreliable narrator plays an important role in the narration and understanding of the novel. The novel features Richard Pape, who acts as both a participant in the crime and a detached observer. Like the classic figure of a detective's sidekick or assistant (e.g., Dr. Watson in Sherlock Holmes stories), Richard narrates the events from an outsider's perspective. He is not fully integrated into the elite world of his classmates but is drawn into their actions, which gives him a unique vantage point for recounting the group's moral decline. Richard's role as the observer aligns with the detective story tradition where the narrator is not the primary focus but instead provides the lens through which the investigation or unraveling of events is seen.

Psychological Complexity: The Characters as Central Figures in a Whydunnit

A key feature of the whydunnit is the deep exploration of the psychological motivations behind the crime. In *The Secret History*, each character, especially Henry, the group's enigmatic leader, is driven by complex psychological motivations. Tartt weaves an intricate psychological web around her characters, making their

unraveling the primary focus of the narrative. Richard Pape, the novel's unreliable narrator, acts as the lens through which we understand the events, though he is often distanced from the core decision-making process, particularly from Henry's motives.

Henry is perhaps the most fascinating figure, representing a Platonic idealist obsessed with transcending conventional morality. His intellectual enigma and desire to live beyond ordinary ethical standards are key to understanding the novel's central crime. Henry's drive to recreate the purity of the ancient world through Dionysian rituals is emblematic of the whydunnit's exploration of *why* people commit crimes based on higher philosophical or psychological ideals. This obsession ultimately culminates in the accidental murder of a local farmer during one of these rituals which Bunny sees and blackmails the group eventually leading to his murder.

Henry's philosophical leanings are based on a distorted form of Nietzschean thought, particularly the idea of the Übermensch, who operates beyond ordinary moral constraints. The intellectualization of murder reflects Nietzsche's ideas on the “will to power” and the rejection of conventional morality. Henry's embrace of this philosophy suggests a psychological need to transcend his limitations, which manifests as his desire to commit the ultimate transgressive act. Nietzsche's ideas, especially from *Beyond Good and Evil*, inform Henry's justification for violence:

“Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it” (Henry, in Chapter 7).

This line captures the moral and aesthetic transgression at the heart of Henry's motivations and the murder itself. The murder of Bunny is framed not just as a practical necessity but also as an aesthetic experience for Henry—an event that allows him to transcend human emotion and conventional ethics, which is sometimes very commonly seen in psychopaths.

Motive and Moral Corruption: Why the Crime Happens

The deeper “why” of the murder comes from the unraveling of the characters' moral compasses. Initially united by their intellectual pursuits under the guidance of their charismatic professor, Julian Morrow, the group becomes increasingly isolated and detached from the real world. Their obsession with classical ideals, particularly the Dionysian ecstasy they experience during the ritual, sets them on a path of moral erosion. The decision to murder Bunny is less about revenge and more about maintaining the secrecy of their shared transgression—the accidental killing during their Bacchic rite. Bunny's murder is driven by fear of exposure, a necessity to preserve the group's unity, and a desperate attempt to protect the fragile philosophical world they've built.

Bunny's exclusion from the group and his subsequent murder stem from his inability to conform to the high-minded intellectualism and cold detachment that Henry embodies. Bunny, with his crassness and lack of moral ambiguity, serves as a foil to the rest of the group's idealized self-perception. His extortion of Henry and the others—demanding money in exchange for his silence about the earlier murder—exposes the cracks in their moral armor. Bunny's murder becomes inevitable, not just because of his threat to expose them but also because he represents a disruption of their carefully constructed intellectual world.

The "whydunnit" aspect of the story comes to the forefront here, as the reader is asked to consider not only why Bunny had to die from a practical standpoint (to keep the secret of the previous murder) but also why the characters' moral compasses had degraded to the point where such a solution seemed acceptable. This gradual decline into amorality is one of the novel's core themes, explored in both the philosophical and emotional dimensions of the characters' lives.

Bunny's murder is not only a literal crime but also a symbolic one. His innocence and lack of intellectual sophistication make him an easy target for the group, who view him as a threat to their carefully constructed world. However, his death shatters the group's illusion of invincibility, and they are forced to confront the reality of their actions. The novel suggests that violence, no matter how justified it may seem in the moment, inevitably leads to moral and psychological decay.

Influence of Classical Texts and Tragic Structure

The group's obsession with classical Greek literature, particularly the tragic form, informs their actions and provides a backdrop for the novel's themes of fate and inevitability. In many ways, *The Secret History* is structured as a modern tragedy, with its characters acting out roles reminiscent of Greek heroes. As in Greek tragedies, the characters are driven by hubris, fate, and a sense of inevitability that leads to their downfall. Their studies under Julian imbue them with a fatalistic view of the world, where actions are predestined and moral consequences become secondary to intellectual pursuits.

Their passion for Greek is also important. While talking about the book Donna Tartt says, "Greek, extraordinarily described as "that language innocent of all quirks and cranks (Mills, 189), symbolizes the Otherness of these students: it is their special language for secret communication when others are around, and we are told that (Mills, 189-90). They'd had the same experience of looking up from their books with fifth-century eyes and finding the world disconcertingly sluggish and alien as if it were not their home."

Henry, in particular, adopts a tragic hero's mentality, believing that his actions are justified by his higher understanding of the world. In the tradition of classical tragedies, his hubris blinds him to the moral consequences of his actions. This sense of inevitability—the idea that Bunny's murder is not only necessary but fated—aligns with the deterministic themes found in classical Greek literature, reinforcing the "why" of the crime as rooted in philosophical and psychological predestination.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the concept of hamartia, or tragic flaw, as central to the downfall of tragic heroes. Henry's hamartia is his intellectual arrogance, which allows him to believe that he can commit murder and emerge unscathed.

Theoretical Texts on Motivation and the Whydunnit Structure

Regarding theoretical approaches, the novel aligns with the psychological theories of crime and moral transgression. Sigmund Freud's exploration of guilt and the unconscious in *Totem and Taboo* is particularly relevant, as the characters in *The Secret History* are driven by both conscious and unconscious desires. Their intellectual engagement with Greek tragedy, particularly Dionysian rituals, taps into their repressed desires and leads to the transgressive act of murder. Freud's exploration of how cultural taboos and repressed instincts influence human behavior is mirrored in the characters' moral disintegration, where their desire for intellectual purity leads to violent outcomes. Henry, in particular, embodies the shadow, embracing the darker aspects of his personality in pursuit of transcendence. His shadow self comes to dominate his actions, leading him to justify murder as a necessary step in achieving his intellectual ideals.

Conclusion: The Secret History as a Whydunnit

In many detective stories, the detective's goal is to bring the criminal to justice, exposing the guilt of the perpetrator. In *The Secret History*, the primary focus after Bunny's death is the characters' confrontation with their own guilt. Each member of the group reacts differently, from Charles' descent into alcoholism to Henry's cold rationalizations. Richard and the others are haunted by what they've done, much like criminals in traditional detective fiction who are caught by the weight of their own guilt even if they initially evade legal punishment. This psychological unraveling functions as an internal "investigation" into the effects of their crime. *The Secret History* is a compelling example of a whydunnit, focusing not on the mechanics of the crime but on the psychological, philosophical, and emotional motivations that drive its characters to murder. Inspired by Modernism, the novel's emphasis was on the

innermost inner life, resulting in a psychological impulse that was lyrical, and non-societal, constantly exposing itself to the danger of aesthetic solipsism. These works are marked by an emphasis on recurring patterns of experience, those paradigmatic human occasions that seem to happen outside of time: the trauma of being cast into the world at birth, the sorrows of travel, the joys of love, and the mystery of death (Holquist).

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